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Female entrepreneurs venture into male-dominated industries and thrive

Published: Sunday, April 11, 2010, 2:15 PM Updated: Sunday, April 11, 2010, 4:50 PM



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Marilyn Grabowski, right, the owner and president, of Atlantic Infra-Red, a paving company, works with company supervisor Tom Brand, left as he prepares to fill in potholes in Newark.

When Marilyn Grabowski answers the phone at her South Jersey road paving business, first-time callers often think she's a secretary.

"I'm the boss," the 46-year-old says she politely tells callers.

Grabowski, who is the owner and president of Atlantic Infra-Red in Point Pleasant Beach, says she understands why her response usually elicits disbelief. While industry peers have grown accustomed to seeing the petite blonde supervising road crews — affectionately dubbing her the "Lady in Red" for her crimson outfits — others aren't used to seeing a woman in a hard hat.

"I'm probably the only woman in New Jersey fixing potholes," she said. "I'm rare."

She is becoming less of an oddity. As the number of female business owners and entrepreneurs has steadily risen over the past few decades, many have ventured into traditionally male-dominated industries like road paving, construction, engineering and even trucking, experts said.

The Center for Women in Business Research, which estimates there are now 10.1 million women-owned firms across the country generating \$1.9 trillion in annual sales, said the roster is

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increasingly expanding beyond just such "soft" industries like marketing, public relations and retail.

"What we're really seeing now is women with more significant businesses and higher revenues moving into some of the nontraditional fields," said Gwen Martin, research director for the McLean, Va.-based nonprofit.

Grabowski says she decided to start Atlantic Infra-Red in 2002 after talking to her husband Tom, who worked for a paving company, and realizing that "part of the problem with this business is there's no marketing."

The former pharmaceutical marketing rep has since grown the firm to 15 employees and annual revenues of \$2 million — all while working out of her home office and raising two kids.

"It's a tremendous amount of juggling, but it's much better than working in an office all day long," she said.

Her story is part of a larger movement in the last decade as women knocked down stereotypes of professions that have been traditionally perceived as masculine, said Margaret Barton, executive director of the National Women's Business Council, an advisory council in Washington, D.C.

"Women are breaking through. They're saying, 'So what? I can do it,'" Barton said. "They're less inhibited by the perception that these industries are nontraditional in the first place."

But women entrepreneurs still face many societal and familial pressures, she said.

A study published by the Small Business Administration's Office of Advocacy last year found that while self-employed women are on the rise, they work on average 10 fewer hours a week than self-employed men. At the same time, women spend three hours more per week on childcare than their male counterparts.

Women also face a constant stream of skepticism from male colleagues, especially in nontraditional industries, experts said.

Julie Lyssy, a spokeswoman for the National Association of Women in Construction in Fort Worth, Texas, said while the number of females in the industry has hovered around 10 percent over the last decade — or 1.04 million women — more of them are moving into bigger roles like architects and engineers.

This slow but gradual advancement into higher positions has given younger women in the industry "role models" to emulate, she said. It has also helped make gender less of a distraction for men.

"At some point, there becomes a difference between who you are as a gender, and the caliber of your work," she said. "And the caliber of your work speaks for itself."

NOT DEFINED BY GENDER

Jennifer Nevins, owner and president of D.W. Smith Associates, a land design and engineering firm in Farmingdale, said she knows the feeling of being judged by her gender.

The 45-year-old, who took over the firm in 2002 after rising through the ranks for more than a decade, said surviving in a male-dominated industry is "a matter of them taking you seriously."






Nevins says she tries to ensure her peers focus on her work, not her gender, by never wearing skirts to job sites.

"I don't want to be perceived as a demure young woman," she said. "I want them to focus on the technical work we're doing."

Still, securing work can be tough sometimes. Until recently, the 25-employee firm had focused mostly on private-sector projects. When the recession hit, Nevins decided to expand the company's focus to state and federal contracts. She says she quickly found "the only way for a woman in this industry to get a contract is to partner with one of the big boys."

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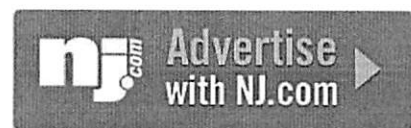
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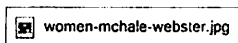
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So two years ago, Nevins got the firm state-certified as a woman-owned business, a classification that can help get the company onto shortlists at many large corporations, which often set aside a portion of their projects for minority groups. Her firm has since been tapped by PSE&G and New Jersey Natural Gas for opportunities she says it might not have otherwise received.

Experts said even in many of the traditional industries, securing work still depends heavily on networking with the top executives, many of whom are men.

"The old boys' club is still very real in business and it's very powerful," said Mary Gatta, director of Gender and Workforce Policy at Rutgers University's Center for Women and Work. "It's not surprising we don't see women at the top of Fortune 500 companies."

POWER MOVES



Peggy McHale and Sandi Webster are co-principals of Consultants 2 Go outside their office on the NJIT campus in Newark.

Peggy McHale and Sandi Webster, who started Newark-based Consultants 2 Go in 2002, said it took nearly four years to secure one of their first clients, a New York financial services firm, because their female contacts at the company were at the junior level. Working their way up to the male executive at the top took many phone calls and a lot of patience, they said.

Meanwhile, a male acquaintance started a similar company a year later and scored his first multimillion-dollar contract within weeks. That's when McHale, 51, and Webster, 48, say they realized they were hitting a glass ceiling.

"There's a difference: It was two men and not two women," McHale said. "They were buds, they went way back... I hate to say it, it sounds so cliché, but they played golf together."

So, a few years ago, the pair agreed Webster should take up golf as a way of hobnobbing with potential clients. She says she has since become "decent" at the sport — and with some good results.

"You're out there for five hours on average and you're playing 18 holes, and from there you start to make connections," Webster said.

But other women business owners say they're trying to connect with customers in a style all their own.

Grabowski, the road paver, said every February she mails out hundreds of Valentine's Day cards — all red, of course — to clients and fellow contractors.

"The men don't know what to do about it," she said. "But they absolutely remember me."

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